

Digital media in pharmacy public health

Opinion

Over the last decade, the public health role of pharmacists (in particular, community pharmacists) has been a matter of great debate and much research activity.¹ While the role of the community pharmacist has always included elements of promoting health and wellbeing in the local communities they serve, it is believed that they could be utilized more effectively in this field.

Public health initiatives in pharmacy currently involve the use of resources such as health promotion leaflets and posters to market a particular health topic. They also involve the pharmacist or a member of the pharmacy team giving of their time and expertise to support patients. An exciting development in the field of communication is the emergence of new digital technologies such as social media which may offer pharmacist's innovative opportunities to interact with patients and further enhance their health promotion and disease prevention roles.

Social media (SM) has been defined as, "interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (e.g. texts, images, audios, videos, games) employing mobile and web-based technologies".² Types of social media platforms include those in which the user shares content e.g. YouTube, Wikipedia; and those in which the user builds relationships with others e.g. Facebook, Twitter.

According to a report by Ofcom,³ "In the UK, nearly all 16-34s are online (98%) and two-thirds (66%) of them have social networking profiles. Those who have a current online profile (96%) have one on Facebook and 83% of 16-24s visit social networking sites more than once a day." People aged 55 and older now represent the fastest-growing age segment in global social networking usage, with the penetration of social networks in this age group increasing nearly 10 percentage points since July 2010 to 80 percent in October 2011.⁴

Recent research on social media use suggests that there are no significant differences in use by race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status.⁵ This suggests that health interventions delivered by social networking sites may be an effective way to reach adults from different ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

As patient acceptance increases and pharmacists become more familiar with the concept of social media as a health education tool they will find that it is a quick and convenient route to keep track of health outcomes allowing them to not only support individual patients but also the wider public.⁶

Advantages and limitations of using social media in healthcare

A number of studies^{2,5-7} have looked at the use of social media in health promotion and have identified some benefits as well as some risks.

Social media has been found to be useful in the realms of customer service, community outreach and patient education as well as in promoting health behaviour change. A study⁵ looking at the use of social media to encourage physical activity, found that internet-

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based social networking sites, including Facebook and Twitter, are now utilized to promote healthy behaviours. It found that social networking sites allowed, "the creation of a social support system and the dissemination of information both important in maintenance of daily physical activity." The study suggested that more research is needed to identify the most effective ways to engage the public on these mediums.

In terms of risks,⁷ the use of social media in healthcare raises concerns about the privacy of patients and pharmacists and the challenge of ensuring that patients don't misinterpret pharmacists comments and then act on them, potentially causing themselves harm. In addition, there were fears that patients may rely too heavily on social media which may mean that they are less likely to visit a healthcare professional for advice.

The use of social media in healthcare in the USA

The USA appears to be leading the way in the exploration of the use of social media by pharmacists in public health initiatives. One study⁸ looking at social media use by Texas-based community pharmacists found that those pharmacists working in the independent sector were more likely to be active on social media, potentially because they were more flexible to adopt new health promotion tools. Pharmacists interviewed stated that they used Facebook to interact with patients with the main reasons for doing so being to provide links to health resources and to give tips on compliance and how to use drug products.

Our vision of how social media can be used by UK pharmacists

Over the next decade it is envisaged that pharmacists and pharmacy staff will play an even greater role in health promotion and public health initiatives within the NHS. The Department of Health believes that health promoting pharmacies will "use a wide range of IT and communications technology to provide electronic health information to the public and to access electronic health records shared with patients".¹

Patients will also be able to consult their pharmacist electronically, either via email or social media, and will be able to access their

personal health records and seek advice from their pharmacist on how to interpret this data.

Using digital and mobile technology pharmacists will be able to reach people who they have not been able to reach before and by using behavioural and motivational science will be able to provide personalised support to many more people than at present⁸ It is, therefore, important that we try to understand whether pharmacists feel able to or are willing to incorporate this new way of working into their job role. They may also feel that they require more training.

In addition to the use of social media, the popularity of smartphones and wearable technology, for example, will allow pharmacists to monitor patients more closely and deliver more timely advice and support when needed. New approaches to health motivation and support will also need to be developed.⁸

These new digital mediums can offer pharmacists exciting ways to engage with their patients and promote meaningful health behaviour changes. More research is needed to discover the exciting potential they offer pharmacists and patients in the future.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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